

# The Spring

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When Derek was seven Great-Aunt Tessa had died and there'd been a funeral party for all the relations. In the middle of it a woman with a face like a sick fish, some kind of cousin, had grabbed hold of Derek and half-talked to him and half-talked to another cousin over his head.

"That's a handsome young fellow, aren't you? (Just like poor old Charlie, that age.) So you're young Derek. How old would you be now, then? (The girls—that's one of them, there, in the green blouse—they're a lot bigger.) Bit of an afterthought, weren't you, Derek? Nice surprise for your mum and dad. (Meg had been meaning to go back to that job of hers, you know . . .)"

And so on, just as if she'd been talking two languages, one he could understand and one he couldn't. Derek hadn't been surprised or shocked. In his heart he'd known all along.

It wasn't that anyone was unkind to him, or even uncaring. Of course his sisters sometimes called him a pest and told him to go away, but mostly the family included him in whatever they were doing and sometimes, not just on his birthday, did something they thought would amuse him. But even those times Derek knew in his heart that he wasn't really meant to be there. If he'd never been born—well, like the cousin said, Mum would have gone back to her job full-time, and five years earlier too, and she'd probably have got promoted so there'd have been more money for things. And better holidays, sooner. And more room in the

house—Cindy was always whining about having to share with Fran . . . It's funny to think about a world in which you've never existed, never been born. It would seem almost exactly the same to everyone else. They wouldn't miss you—there'd never have been anything for them to miss.

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About four years after Great-Aunt Tessa's funeral Dad got a new job and the family moved south. That June Dad and Mum took Derek off to look at a lot of roses. They had their new garden to fill, and there was this famous collection of roses only nine miles away at Something Abbey, so they could go and see if there were ones they specially liked, and get their order in for next winter. Mum and Dad were nuts about gardens. The girls had things of their own to do but it was a tagging-along afternoon for Derek.

The roses grew in a big walled garden, hundreds and hundreds of them, all different, with labels. Mum and Dad stood in front of each bush in turn, cocking their heads and pursing their lips while they decided if they liked it. They'd smell a bloom or two, and then Mum would read the label and Dad would look it up in his book to see if it was disease-resistant; last of all, Mum might write its name in her notebook and they'd give it marks, out of six, like skating judges, and move on. It took *hours*.

After a bit Mum remembered about Derek.

"Why don't you go down to the house and look at the river, darling? Don't fall in."

"Got your watch?" said Dad. "OK, back at the car park,<sup>1</sup> four-fifteen, sharp."

He gave Derek a pound<sup>2</sup> in case there were ice creams anywhere and turned back to the roses.

The river was better than the roses, a bit. The lawn of the big house ran down and became its bank. It was as wide as a road, not very deep but clear, with dark green weed streaming in the current and trout sometimes darting between. Derek found a twig and chucked it in, pacing beside it and timing its speed on his watch. He counted trout for a while, and then walking further along the river, he came to a strange shallow stream which ran through the lawns, like a winding path, only water, just a few inches deep but rushing through its channel in quick

1 **car park**: parking lot

2 **pound**: unit of money in England

ripples. Following it up, he came to a sort of hole in the ground, with a fence round it. The hole had stone sides and was full of water. The water came rushing up from somewhere underground, almost as though it were boiling. It was very clear. You could see a long way down.

While Derek stood staring, a group of other visitors strolled up and one of them started reading from her guidebook, gabbling<sup>3</sup> and missing bits out.

“... remarkable spring ... predates all the rest of the abbey ... no doubt why the monks settled here ... white chalk bowl fifteen feet across and twelve feet deep ... crystal clear water surges out at about two hundred gallons a minute ... always the same temperature, summer and winter ...”

“Magical, don’t you think?” said another of the tourists.

She didn’t mean it. “Magical” was just a word to her. But yes, Derek thought, magical. Where does it come from? So close to the river, too, but it’s got nothing to do with that. Perhaps it comes from another world.

He thought he’d only stood gazing for a short time, hypnotized by the rush of water welling and welling out of nowhere, but when he looked at his watch, it was ten past four. There was an ice-cream van, but Dad and Mum didn’t get back to the car till almost twenty to five.

That night Derek dreamed about the spring. Nothing much happened in the dream, only he was standing beside it, looking down. It was night-time, with a full moon, and he was waiting for the moon to be reflected from the rumpled water. Something would happen then. He woke before it happened, with his heart hammering. He was filled with a sort of dread, though the dream hadn’t been a nightmare. The dread was sort of neutral, halfway between terror and glorious excitement.

The same dream happened the next night, and the next, and the next. When it woke him on the fifth night, he thought this is getting to be a nuisance.

He got out of bed and went to the window. It was a brilliant night, with a full moon high. He felt wide awake. He turned from the window, meaning to get back into bed, but somehow found himself moving into his getting-up routine, taking his pajamas off and pulling on his shirt. The moment he realized what he was doing he stopped himself, but then thought why not? It’d fix that dream, at least. He laughed silently to himself and finished dressing. Ten minutes later he was bicycling through the dark.

| 3 **gabbling**: talking incoherently

Derek knew the way to the abbey because Mum was no use at map reading so that was something he did on car journeys—a way of joining in. He thought he could do it in an hour and a quarter, so he'd be there a bit after one. He'd be pretty tired by the time he got back, but the roads were flat down here compared with Yorkshire.<sup>4</sup> He'd left a note on the kitchen table saying "Gone for a ride. Back for breakfast." They'd think he'd just gone out for an early-morning spin—he was always first up. Nine miles there and nine back made eighteen. He'd done fifteen in one go last month. Shouldn't be too bad.

And in fact, although the night was still, he rode as though there were a stiff breeze at his back, hardly getting tired at all. Late cars swished through the dark. He tried to think of a story in case anyone stopped and asked what he was doing—if a police car came by, it certainly would—but no one did. He reached the abbey at ten past one. The gate was shut, of course. He hadn't even thought about getting in. There might be ivy, or something.

He found some a bit back along the way he'd come, but it wasn't strong or thick enough to climb. Still, it didn't cross his mind he wouldn't get in. He was going to. There would be a way.

The wall turned away from the road beside the garden of another house. Derek wheeled his bike through the gate and pushed it in among some bushes, then followed the wall back through the garden. No light shone from the house. Nobody stirred. He followed the wall of the abbey grounds along toward the back of the garden. He thought he could hear the river rustling beyond. The moonlight was very bright, casting shadows so black they looked solid. The garden became an orchard, heavy old trees, their leafy branches blotting out the moon, but with a clear space further on. Ducking beneath the branches, he headed toward it. The night air smelt of something new, sweetish, familiar—fresh-cut sawdust. When he reached the clear space, he found himself surrounded a tree trunk which had had all its branches cut off and just stood there like a twisted arm sticking out of the ground. Leaning against it was a ladder.

It wasn't very heavy. Derek carried it over to the abbey wall. It reached almost to the top. He climbed, straddled the wall, leaned down and with an effort hauled the ladder up and lowered it on the further side, down into the darkness under the trees that grew there, then

4 Yorkshire: county in northern England

climbed down and groped his way out toward where the moonlight gleamed between the tree trunks. Out in the open on the upper slope of lawn he got his bearings, checked for a landmark so that he would be able to find his way back to the ladder, and walked down in the shadow of the trees toward the river. His heart was beginning to thump, the way it did in the dream. The same dread, between terror and glory, seemed to bubble up inside him.

When he was level with the spring he walked across the open and stood by the low fence, gazing down at the troubled water. It looked very black, and in this light he couldn't see into it at all. He tried to find the exact place he had stood in the dream, and waited. A narrow rim of moon-shadow cast by the wall on the left side edged the disk of water below. It thinned and thinned as the slow-moving moon heeled west. And now it was gone.

The reflection of the moon, broken and scattered by the endlessly upswelling water, began to pass glimmeringly across the disk below. Derek could feel the turn of the world making it move like that. His heart-beat came in hard pulses, seeming to shake his body. Without knowing what he was doing, he climbed the fence and clung to its inner side so that he could gaze straight down into the water. His own reflection, broken by the ripples, was a squat black shape against the silver moonlight. He crouched with his left arm clutching the lowest rail and with his right arm strained down toward it. He could just reach. The black shape changed as the reflection of his arm came to meet it. The water was only water to his touch.

Somehow he found another three inches of stretch and plunged his hand through the surface. The water was still water, but then another hand gripped his.

He almost lost his balance and fell, but the other hand didn't try to pull him in. It didn't let go either. When Derek tried to pull free the hand came with him, and an arm behind it. He pulled, heaved, strained. A head broke the surface. Another arm reached up and gripped the top of the side wall. Now Derek could straighten and take a fresh hold higher up the fence. And now the stranger could climb out, gasping and panting, over the fence and stand on the moonlit lawn beside him. He was a boy about Derek's own age, wearing ordinary clothes like Derek's. They were dry to the touch.

"I thought you weren't coming," said the boy. "Have we got somewhere to live?"

"I suppose you'd better come home."

They walked together toward the trees.

"Who . . . ?" began Derek.

"Not now," said the stranger.

They stole on in silence. We'll have to walk the whole way home, thought Derek. Mightn't get in before breakfast. How'm I going to explain?

The ladder was still against the wall. They climbed it, straddled the top, lowered the ladder on the far side, and climbed down, propping it back against its tree. Then back toward the road.

There were two bikes hidden in the bushes.

"How on . . . ?" began Derek.

"Not now," said the stranger.

They biked in silence the whole way home, getting in just as the sky was turning gray. They took off their shoes and tiptoed up the stairs. Derek was so tired he couldn't remember going to bed.

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They were woken by Cindy's call outside the door.

"Hi! Pests! Get up! School bus in twenty mins!"

Derek scrambled into his clothes and just beat David down the stairs. Dad was in the hallway, looking through the post<sup>5</sup> before driving off to work.

"Morning, twins," he said. "Decided to have a lie-in?"<sup>6</sup>

They gobbled their breakfast and caught the bus by running. Jimmy Grove had kept two seats for them. He always did.

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Very occasionally during that year Derek felt strange. There was something not quite right in the world, something out of balance, some shadow. It was like that feeling you have when you think you've glimpsed something out of the corner of your eye but when you turn your head it isn't there. Once or twice it was so strong he almost said something. One evening, for instance, he and David were sitting either side of Mum while she leafed through an old photograph album. They laughed or groaned at pictures of themselves as babies, or in fancy dress—Tweedledum and Tweedledee<sup>7</sup>—and then Mum pointed at a picture of an old woman with

5 **post**: mail

6 **have a lie in**: sleep in

7 **Tweedledum and Tweedledee**: twins from *Alice in Wonderland*

a crooked grinning face, like a jolly witch, and said, "I don't suppose you remember her. That's Great-Aunt Tessa. You went to her funeral."

"I remember the funeral," said David. "There was a grisly sort of cousin who grabbed us and told us how handsome we were, and then talked over our heads about us to someone else as if we couldn't understand what she was saying."

"She had a face like a sick fish," said Derek.

"Oh, Cousin Vi. She's a pain in the neck. She . . ."

And Mum rattled on about Cousin Vi's murky doings for a bit and then turned the page, but for a moment Derek felt that he had almost grasped the missing whatever-it-was, almost turned his head quick enough to see something before it vanished. No.

On the whole it was a pretty good year. There were dud bits.<sup>8</sup> David broke a leg in the Easter hols,<sup>9</sup> which spoilt things for a while. The girls kept complaining that the house wasn't big enough for seven, especially with the pests growing so fast, but then Jackie got a job and went to live with friends in a flat in Totton. Dad bought a new car. Those were the most exciting things that happened, so it was a nothing-much year, but not bad. And then one weekend in June Mum and Dad went off to the abbey to look at the roses again. Cindy and Fran were seeing friends, so it was just the twins who tagged along.

The roses were the same as last year, and Mum and Dad slower than ever, so after a bit David said, "Let's go and look at the river. OK, Mum?"

Dad gave them money for ices<sup>10</sup> and told them when to be back at the car. They raced twigs on the river, tried to spot the largest trout, and then found the stream that ran through the lawn and followed it up to the spring. They stood staring at the uprushing water for a long while, not saying anything. In the end Derek looked at his watch, saw it was almost four, woke David from his trance and raced him off to look for ices.

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A few nights later Derek woke with his heart pounding. It was something he'd dreamt, but he couldn't remember the dream. He sat up and saw that David's bed was empty. When he got up and put his hand between the sheets, they were still just warm to the touch.

<sup>8</sup> **dud bits**: bad or boring periods

<sup>9</sup> **hols**: holidays

<sup>10</sup> **ices**: frozen desserts composed of ice and fruit juice

All at once memory came back, the eleven years when he'd been on his own and the year when he'd had David. The other years, the ones when he'd been growing up with a twin brother and the photographs in the album had been taken—they weren't real. By morning he wouldn't remember them. By morning he wouldn't remember David either. There was just this one night.

He rushed into his clothes, crept down the stairs and out. The door was unlocked. David's bike was already gone from the shed. He got his own out and started off.

The night was still, but he felt as though he had an intangible wind in his face. Every pedal stroke was an effort. He put his head down and rode on. Normally, he knew, he'd be faster than David, whose leg still wasn't properly strong after his accident, but tonight he guessed David would have the spirit wind behind him, the wind from some other world. Derek didn't think he would catch him. All he knew was that he had to try.

In fact he almost ran into him, about two miles from the abbey, just after the turn off the main road. David was trotting along beside his bike, pushing it, gasping for breath.

"What's happened?" said Derek.

"Got a puncture. Lend me yours. I'll be too late."

"Get up behind. We'll need us both to climb the wall. There mayn't be a ladder this time."

Without a word David climbed onto the saddle. Derek stood on the pedals and drove the bike on through the dark. They leaned the bike against the wall where the ivy grew. It still wasn't thick enough to climb, but it was something to get a bit of a grip on. David stood on the saddle of the bike. Derek put his hands under his heels and heaved him up grunting with the effort, till David could grip the coping<sup>11</sup> of the wall. He still couldn't pull himself right up, but he found a bit of a foothold in the ivy and hung there while Derek climbed onto the crossbar, steadied himself, and let David use his shoulder as a step. A heave, a scrabble, and he was on the wall.

Derek stood on the saddle and reached up. He couldn't look, but felt David reach down to touch his hand, perhaps just to say good-bye. Derek gripped the hand and held. David heaved. Scrabbling and stretching, Derek leaped for the coping. He heard the bike clatter away beneath

11 **coping**: the top covering of a wall



him. David's other hand grabbed his collar. He had an elbow on the coping, and now a knee, and he was up.

"Thanks," he muttered.

The drop on the far side was into blackness. There could have been anything below, but there seemed no help for it. You just had to hang from the coping, let go and trust to luck. Derek landed on softness but wasn't ready for the impact and stumbled, banging his head against the wall. He sat down, his whole skull filled with the pain of it. Dimly he heard a sort of crash, and as the pain seeped away worked out that David must have fallen into a bush. More cracks and rustles as David struggled free.

"Are you OK?" came his voice.

"Think so. Hit my head."

"Where are you?"

"I'm OK. Let's get on."

They struggled out through a sort of shrubbery, making enough noise, it seemed, to wake all Hampshire.<sup>12</sup> Derek's head was just sore on the outside now. Blood was running down his cheek. David was already running, a dark limping shape about twenty yards away. His leg must have gone duff<sup>13</sup> again after all that effort. Derek followed him across the moonlit slopes and levels. They made no effort to hide. If anyone had been watching from the house they must have seen them, the moonlight was so strong. At last they stood panting by the fence of the spring. The rim of shadow still made a thin line under a wall.

"Done it," whispered David. "I thought I was stuck."

"What'd have happened?"

"Don't know."

"What's it like . . . the other side?"

"Different. Shhh."

The shadow vanished and the reflection of the moon moved onto the troubled disk. Derek glanced sideways at his brother's face. The rippled, reflected light glimmered across it, making it very strange, gray white like a mushroom, and changing all the time as the ripples changed, as if it wasn't even sure of its own proper shape.

David climbed the fence, grasped the bottom rail, and lowered his legs into the water. Derek climbed too, gripped David's hand, and crouched to lower his brother—yes, his brother still—his last yard in this world.

<sup>12</sup> Hampshire: county in southern England

<sup>13</sup> duff: slang for bad or worthless

David let go of the rail and dropped. Derek gripped his hand all the way to the water.

As he felt that silvery touch the movement stopped, and they hung there, either side of the rippled mirror. David didn't seem to want to let go, either.

Different? thought Derek. Different how?

The hand wriggled, impatient. Something must be happening the other side. No time to make up his mind. He let go of the rail.

In the instant that he plunged toward the water he felt a sort of movement around him, very slight, but clear. It was the whole world closing in, filling the gap where he had been. In that instant, he realized everything changed. Jackie would still be at home, Fran would be asleep in his room, not needing to share with Cindy. Nobody would shout at him to come to breakfast. His parents would go about their day with no sense of loss; Jimmy Grove would keep no place for him on the school bus; Mum would be a director of her company, with a car of her own . . . and all the photographs in the albums would show the same cheerful family, two parents, three daughters, no gap, not even the faintest shadow that might once have been Derek.

He was leaving a world where he had never been born. ∞



RIPPLED SURFACE  
1950  
M.C. Escher